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Users not Watchers: Motivation and the use of discussion boards in online learning

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Abstract

College students will participate in any learning activity when they feel it helps. Students have an uncanny sense of a tipping point of use. Is it worth my time? Will it help me get a better grade? Discussion boards only work if they help and not hinder online learning. Discussing course content online can be as useful as discussing it among physical classmates. In fact, actively using discussion boards can encourage students to be **active users not passive watchers**. Users are motivated to engage. Watchers disengage. The present paper provides six examples of how DB motivated online learning. These examples are not exhaustive, but include DB as a way to organize teams, use other tools, file share, mentor, share experiences, and create a small learning community within a larger class. The advantages and disadvantages of using discussion boards are then presented along with some conclusions about motivation theory. The main purposes of this paper are to: 1) provide examples of the use of DB that illustrate the impact of emotion and motivation on successful online learning and 2) connect these examples to current theory. Active users learn, passive watchers don't. Discussion boards can be a very effective learning tool, but only if the professor wields the power of motivation.

Users not Watchers: Motivation and the use of discussion boards in online learning

Much research has shown that discussion boards (DB) in online learning can be as useful as any physical discussion (Prenksy, 2003; Ransdell, 2013). Prenksy was one of the first researchers to emphasize that online learning had to be motivating, just like any other type of learning. Students will only do what they believe will help them learn. Guss, Burger, and Dorner (2017) have recently reviewed uses of motivation in promoting online learning. Complex problem solving requires emotion and motivation to give it energy and focus. If students don't feel motivated, then they cannot muster the energy to act. Students can be active Users, not passive Watchers if DB promotes it. The main purposes of this paper are to: 1) provide examples of the use of DB that illustrate the impact of emotion and motivation on successful online learning and 2) connect these examples to current theory.

Motivation like in social media

Gikas and Grant (2013) found that students who engage in online learning the way they do with social media are students who learn more deeply. Social media produces emotion and energy. Virtual students in their native habitat of social media “meet” with each other and become deeply connected to the content. If what happens that is so enticing in social media can be recreated in online learning, deep understanding could be promoted. Students use WhatsApp, GoogleDoc, and other communication systems in order to facilitate group assignments, especially when students never meet in person. If DB participation can be encouraged in the way using social media like Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram do effortlessly, students may learn better. It can be difficult to use Blackboard DB well and compete with the likes of

Snapchat. Blackboard can be cumbersome and looks old-fashioned. Students have to be convinced that the media, chalkboard or blackboard or Blackboard, is not the message. If they can use Blackboard DB to connect with other students, get work done faster and better, then they may be able to look past the limits of the software. In fact, the real world is full of software that does not always fulfill its hype. Students must learn to press on with error messages and slow downloads, and other annoyances, because persistence is a good goal in and of itself. Motivation and emotion are required to promote active use (Prensky, 2003).

Student schemas into professor schemas

Online students may have a student schema but do not have a well-formed professor schema. Deciding what the professor wants and how to give it to them, is part of a successful experience online or in the classroom. The decision to participate meaningfully in DB to get an assignment done must be quick and yield rewards right away. Students can establish their own intellectual authority by discussing material in a structured way in DB. Intellectual authority can be a welcome by-product of engagement in DB. When successful college students use discussion boards, it is clear that they are active users, not watchers. These users operate with emotion and motivation in the online environment when prompted by assignments like a group project. Students disengage the moment they feel that DB work is busy work. Topics and assignments must be real world and important to the student beyond the grade in the class. But the grade is important (Ransdell, 2013). Rubrics that require DB participation often lead to confirmative responses with little critical thinking. DB may have the most face validity when it is in service to group activities, like collaborative

presentations. The examples presented below will illustrate the use of emotion and motivation to improve online learning using DB.

Examples of the good uses of DB

Through more than three decades of creative classroom settings and learning experiences, the present authors have discovered that there can be many styles of communications which can be considered good use of DB. Examples of effective discussion board use include students writing course reflections within their assigned group postings. The students exchange files, share observations, and edit submissions collaboratively. Here is a subset of examples that illustrate the effective use of DB. These examples are not exhaustive, but include DB as a way to organize teams, use other tools, file share, mentor, share experiences, and create a small learning community within a larger class.

1. to organize student teams.
2. to use any collaboration tools within Blackboard.
3. to do file sharing using Blackboard and external collaboration tools.
4. to prepare need-based mentorship.
5. to share experiences of good DB use.
6. to use DB to create students as members of a learning community.

Example 1: to organize student teams

This example takes the form of student words. “I wanted to let you know that my group enjoyed your class this semester. We didn't really know each other too well and were nervous about working in a group. However, we ended up working so well together that we are requesting that you assign us to the same group again! We are all signed up for your Integral Calculus class. We have gotten to know each other and feel very comfortable asking each other for help and encouraging each other. After we finished class tonight, all of us discussed how much we liked our group and they asked me to email you! We might end up being a great model group for you to use! It has relieved some of the stress of completing the assignments by being able to ask each other questions and not feel dumb! :) Also, we have an understanding of how each other works and our different math backgrounds. I can tell from hearing the other groups present during class that not all of the groups worked as well together as we did. Please consider allowing us to work together again in our same group. Thanks Amy P”.

Example 2: to use any collaboration tools within Blackboard

Use of the DB can teach students many new things about collaborative learning. Through exposure to course readings posted in various forms of the DB (i.e., Chats, GoToMeeting, and Groups) as well as in group research projects, the students have discovered strategies to encourage ways to think open-mindedly when approaching a problem. They have learned the value of using problem- related questioning techniques to promote “out-of-the-box” thinking so that students can find solutions to problems. In an online statistics class, students may use the DB to collaborate on assignments that are not traditionally considered group work.

Example 3: to do file sharing using Blackboard and external collaboration tools

Students can develop file sharing ideas from other students. They may use DB to start a discussion about using other software to share files, or import and export files, or exchange presentations (i.e., Powerpoint or Prezi).

Example 4: to prepare need-based mentorship

DBs have often been used to manage and mentor student progress. During the life of a course, students acquire new active learning strategies that they can implement. These new strategies can help students to become more engaged in their learning. Some strategies include allowing students to work together in teams and complete a task. They have learned that it is important to periodically check for understanding, as a group or individually, to ensure that the students are not confused. Students can also be allowed the opportunity to mentor others as this will keep them more actively involved in their own learning.

Example 5: to share experiences of good DB use

College students can be motivated to think systematically about their DB habits and learn from experience. Students learn from experience simply by interacting with each other; but, it takes a lot of modeling, demonstration, and encouragement to convince them that learning by sharing experiences in a DB is worthy of their time and effort. Sharing experiences encourages students to take their own journey as they explore the problem.

Example 6: to use DB to create students as members of a learning community

College students often seek out becoming members of a learning community. Like with social media, they meet inside, outside, and online to practice speaking with intellectual authority. DBs can promote a sense of community for students taking online classes in far-flung locales or in the local dorm room.

Conclusions

DBs only work when students are motivated to engage in them. The six examples presented here illustrate the use of motivation. Student know when an online learning tool tips the scale into use. If they can use it to their advantage, they will embrace it. Conversely, if they cannot use it to get a better grade, they will not use it. Interestingly, if students can be motivated to use DB (Guss, Burger & Dorner, 2017), they get the benefit of connecting with other students in a way that gives them intellectual authority. The following concludes with a description of ways that DB can help or hinder online learning.

There are many advantages and disadvantages of using DB to increase online learning. Some advantages include simply more engagement. Using online DBs can increase time for in-depth reflection of subject matter, development of critical thinking and writing skills, and an increased sense of community. Student collaboration promotes learning from each other's unique experiences and perspectives. DBs enable students to participate in an online learning community focused on their specific areas of interest. Detailed DB posts allow participants to demonstrate content knowledge and

share research with one another, which creates an enriched learning experience. Students often connect to others' responses and ideas, even asking questions about specific examples or information included in a post in an effort to understand concepts more fully and gain deeper insight.

Students with firsthand experience in the field may share anecdotes that help others imagine real-life scenarios, which stimulates discussion about best practices, strategies that work, and even suggestions for alternative solutions in any given situation. In the best case scenario, students exchange contact information so they can stay in touch with one another after the class ends to continue their learning and academic conversations into the future. Another strength of using DBs is the ability to incorporate an experiential learning component outside the classroom. Whatever the students' location, they can participate in a hands-on activity and then reflect on their experience in the DB.

The drawbacks of DB must also be contemplated. Among disadvantages of using discussion boards one of the most general is lack of motivation. DB is very much in the eye of the beholder. If the professor does not motivate successfully, students will not engage. Students can perceive that a learning tool is busy work or a waste of time. Students can easily go off topic, and those with poor writing skills may not be able to communicate their actual knowledge of the topic accurately. When students feel as though they are required to respond to a prompt that is not relevant to them, they will come up with a response to meet the minimal requirements of the course or their instructor. When this happens, students are not fully engaged and invested in the

learning activity. If a student does not understand the question or prompt, there is more of a tendency for them to guess or write a response that needs redirection.

Furthermore, students whose strength is not in the area of writing may not be able to communicate their thoughts and knowledge of the subject matter in an effective manner.

In sum, DB can be a very powerful tool for online learning. Just as with mobile devices (Gikas & Grant, 2013) or online games (Prensky, 2003), that which motivates, increases learning. Ransdell (2013) found that meaningful posts are essential to learning because they motivate engagement. Active users learn, passive watchers, don't. DBs can be a very effective learning tool, but only if the professor wields the power of motivation.

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